

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK on Tuesday, 19th March, 2024 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Alistair Neill, (Chairman)
County Councillor Laura Wright, (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: Jill Bond, Paul Pavia, Peter Strong, Rachel Buckler, Meirion Howells, Phil Murphy (substituting for Ann Webb), John Crook

Also in attendance County Councillors: Cabinet Member for the Economy, Paul Griffiths

Officers in Attendance

Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Jane Rodgers, Chief Officer for Social Care, Safeguarding and Health
David Jones, Head of Public Protection
Louise Driscoll, Specialist Environmental Health Officer
Geraint Edwards, Solicitor
Alun Thomas, Principal Environmental Health Officer
Sam Watkins, Specialist Environmental Health Officer

APOLOGIES: County Councillors Ann Webb and Catherine Fookes

Note: the following minutes focus on the challenge from members – for the full discussion, the recording of the meeting is at www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPlx8E39e1c&list=PLlmqn4nAaFJDsC93C-EKJZrFkDEQBdiXK&index=18

1. Declarations of Interest

None

2. Public Open Forum

3. Covid learning and pandemic preparedness

Cabinet Member Paul Griffiths and Dave Jones introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Jane Rodgers, Louise Driscoll and Alun Thomas.

Key Points raised by Members:

- To note for residents that the LRF is the Local Resilience Forum, it's important that residents understand that this forum is ongoing to ensure the county is kept safe, for any particular development that might bring about risk, not just about the pandemic.
- This report is, understandably, from an Environmental Health perspective, but the committee also asked about a review of what happened to the rest of the staff: when staff went away for Test & Trace, how everyone managed; how people coped with working from home i.e. impact on the council of the pandemic and what was done in finer detail? Will there be another report covering this, and what would be done differently? – **ACTION: discuss whether a further report can be done that incorporates learning from all directorates combined**

- Councillor Bond previously sent a tool for a Before Action Review and After Action review – will that follow? – **ACTION: Councillor Bond to resend**
- The Integrated Impact Assessment is very important, as it needs to be written down what was done, how ethnic minorities and more vulnerable people were thought about, etc. – if it's not written down then it could be forgotten.
- What was the involvement of elected members and Cabinet, and is there any learning coming out of that as to what could be done better?
- How were changes managed and the ability to ensure that Cabinet members, the Leader and all members were properly informed? How would that work in terms of a post-Covid recovery plan?
- It seems that non-pandemic issues that were affected by the pandemic in some cases began to test some of the relationships and some of the decision making – was that the case?
- Councillor Murphy provided a Cabinet perspective from the period: Peter Davies and he had weekly briefing sessions and contact in some form 7 days a week. A great deal of information was exchanged, and although officers naturally took the lead in the specific operations Councillor Murphy felt he always knew what was going on, and his opinion was sought on things. He was very impressed by how the various agencies linked together.
- Councillor Murphy observed that where the system broke down was that initially all of the public followed the rules, then frustration kicked in and an unwillingness to follow the rules began to set in. Departments were affected, in that internal audit and Monlife disappeared, and an important part of the strategy was to furlough as few people as possible and move them into other operations. One of the best things that was done was the introduction of the Cwtch, for staff to come together online to share their frustrations and be kept informed.
- Councillor Murphy noted that reflecting on where things might have been done differently would be useful, despite the successes, and that many lessons learned will have already been incorporated into day-to-day operations e.g. hybrid meetings.
- If there was a breakdown in public trust in the national government's rules, what role is there for the local authority to actually play in reinforcing those points so that local people might feel that there is a major organisation that they can trust and it's not all on the national government?
- What needs to be borne in mind is, how do we coerce people into more cooperation than we actually got? #
- Were protocols concerning records for decision making where they needed to be?
- To what extent should those key experiences guide us in what would be wise to do now in preparation for what come in the future?
- The country is still suffering effects from the pandemic, especially hospitality businesses – should we engage more with local businesses if such a thing happens again, as we are told it will?
- Regarding the Regional Care Home multidisciplinary team, do you have a view as to whether you would have lobbied for different restrictions? i.e. did it do more harm than good, in some circumstances, that care home residents were unable to see their families?
- What effect did isolation measures have on care leavers e.g. those living alone at age 16-17 – what would have been done differently and therefore for the next time? Could a protocol be put in place to focus on the importance of communication with this particular demographic?
- Was it difficult to comply with regulations, as they moved so quickly, and were there things that you could see would be good to put in place?

- One conclusion that was reached was the importance of good ventilation to counter airborne disease: in terms of schools, what should we be doing to develop better ventilation?
- Regarding the Incident Management Team and the Regional Operational Planning Group, were there things that you would like to have done differently? Any concerns?
- Given the time constraints during the pandemic, how did the coproduction of documents and plans happen? Was this true coproduction or was this more collaboration and codesign with our partners? How did it work with our commissioned partners, particularly care providers?
- How beneficial were the preparations that were made in relation to Britain's exit from the European Union e.g. in relation to access of key supplies? Was access to those stocks useful, particularly in the early weeks and months of the pandemic?
- In terms of partnership working with health professionals, would a more rationalised regional model to handling such crisis be more preferable in terms of streamlining, decision making and operational planning rather than the small local authority model?
- From recollection, there were severe supply problems in the early period of the pandemic, so it's a very important area on which to focus – perhaps for the future, it is more about clarifying supply lines and not stockpiling items with a minimal shelf life.
- Presumably, not a great deal would be done differently next time, largely because the team was on a sharp learning curve and what was being done by the end of the pandemic was different from at the beginning?
- Much of the work must have been reactive – e.g. incorporating the large number of new regulations etc. – and we need to recognise that a future pandemic might be very different from the last one, so it won't be easy to pick up the previous work and reapply it?
- Regarding the report's reference to work/life balance: were some of the Environmental Health team close to breaking point given the pressure they were under? Do we have a problem in that our pool of people having to deal with these things is too small? Can anything be done to look at a pool that can be expanded in a future emergency?
- It would be good to take forward the suggestion of training that might go on now, to allocate individuals to specific parts of the county, for example, to allow us to step up at very short notice with a much higher level of capacity.
- It is important that we keep and use people with the right knowledge and experience if and when something else develops.
- Do we have any understanding of the number of residents affected by Long Covid? If not, can it be found out so that we can do more to support them? – **ACTION: find out from Aneurin Bevan colleagues**

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to officers and the Cabinet Member for this report. The response to the pandemic from the council and communities was exceptional: this committee and the rest of the council is eternally grateful to the community, third sector, council officers and employees who did so much to help, and put themselves in harm's way. It was the most remarkable effort and one which will have its own special chapter in the history of Monmouthshire. And we note our important partners who are blended into this report: the NHS, the police, the ambulance services, Fire and Rescue and others to whom we owe an enormous debt of gratitude. This report says so much about what makes Monmouthshire and the County Council such great places.

4. Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme and Action List

To include a piece on future planning, incorporating reviews from teams, to bring back to the committee, as discussed today. – ACTION

5. Cabinet and Council Work Planner

6. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting held on 20th February 2024

The minutes were confirmed.

7. Next Meeting: 14th May 2024

The meeting ended at **12.10 pm**